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April 23, 2020

**The Timeless Story Across the Ages: New for Every Generation**  
**An Intergenerational Advent Worship Series**

By

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Doctor of Ministry

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## Abstract

The Timeless Story Across the Ages: New for Every Generation  
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Intergenerational ministry expert, James Frazier, argues, “The best way to be formed in Christ is to sit among the elders, listen to their stories, break bread with them, and drink from the same cup, observing how these earlier generations of saints ran the race, fought the fight, and survived in grace.”<sup>1</sup> There is a silo effect happening in many American churches where generations are being divided up and segregated by age. The lack of intergenerational interaction is detrimental to faith development and the overall health and vitality of the local congregation. It is my assertion that bringing the generations together for worship will deepen the sense of belonging for our younger people and help people all ages to become comfortable interacting with those outside of their age group. In bringing the generations together in worship, it is my argument that both the church and individuals will be spiritually healthier as relationships are formed across generational lines.

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<sup>1</sup> Holly Catteron Allen and Christine Lawton Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation: Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community and Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic of Intervarsity Press, 2012), 17.

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## STATING THE PROBLEM/SETTING OF MINISTRY

During a worship class for seminary in 2011, I had an experience which has stayed with me shaping the way I understand the importance of intergenerational ministry. I walked into the contemporary sanctuary at Trinity United Methodist Church in Gainesville, Florida, and saw a wall of fame. This wall was not the typical wall of fame of former clergy. Rather, this wall was filled with former children and youth of the church who heard a call to ministry and are now serving in mission and ministry as missionaries and clergy around the world. There must have been over 20 pictures! At first, my heart leapt with joy at the thought of this church's investment in their young people. Quickly, the burst of joy was turned to sadness as I realized that the church where I was serving as the Assistant to the Pastor, The First United Methodist Church of Jupiter-Tequesta, had no pictures they could display on such a wall. While I felt gutted in that moment, I had deep hope that one day, this would change.

Following seminary in 2012, I left Jupiter and was appointed to a church in Ocala, Florida. After four years of serving this community, I was appointed back to First Jupiter to serve as the Senior Pastor. The congregation of First Jupiter consists of a predominately Anglo and middle to upper middle class socioeconomic community. I arrived July 1, 2016. Since its beginning in 1967, the First United Methodist Church of Jupiter-Tequesta has known a life of growth and vitality, and it has known a life of decline and weariness. When I arrived four years ago, the church was in decline. In fact one person described it as "circling the drain." All but a couple of young families had left the church. There were two youth and one child in church each Sunday. This was not always the case. The church once thrived with younger families. From the early 1980s to late 2000s, the church experienced multiple quick turnovers with both senior pastors and youth directors. The pattern of growth and decline followed accordingly with each

abrupt departure. Families and youth would bond with the youth leader or pastor, and when these leaders moved on either by choice or otherwise, so too, would many of the congregants who were part of the church during each different pastor's tenure.

When I arrived back to Jupiter one of the first conversations I had was with our Leadership Team, who are the elected leaders of our church and who govern, vision, and implement the mission and ministries of the church. I reminded this group of the congregation's covenant made with every baptized child and youth of the church. During each baptism the congregation is asked, "Will you nurture one another in the Christian faith and life and include *these persons* now before you in your care?"<sup>2</sup> The congregation's response to this question is,

"With God's help we will proclaim the good news and live according to the example of Christ. We will surround *these persons* with a community of love and forgiveness, that they may grow in *their* service to others. We will pray for *them*, that *they* may be true disciples who walk in the way that leads to life."<sup>3</sup>

The reason I wanted to remind the Leadership Team of this covenant was to encourage them to hire staff for youth and children ministries. How can we nurture the faith of young people when we have no programs or leaders for them? To the credit of the Leadership Team, they did commit to live into these vows. They committed to pray for our young people and to be intentional about nurturing the spiritual life and faith of our children and youth. They began to realize that the congregation is to be "an entire network of faithful and mature Christians stating that they understand the responsibilities the parents are taking on, they know that the parents cannot do it alone in our culture today, and that they are here to help those parents."<sup>4</sup> They

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<sup>2</sup> Neil. M. Alexander, Editor, *The United Methodist Book of Worship*: (Nashville, Tennessee: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), 96.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 96.

<sup>4</sup> Gary and Laurie Pecuch, *Faith Webbing: Wrapping Children and Youth in a Web of Faith* (United States of America: Xulon Press, 2013), 23.

agreed to put this covenant into action and consented to hire a new Children's Ministry Director and a new Youth Ministry Director. With the hiring of these two new staff persons, our children and youth ministry programs began to grow and take off. Young families who had left the church returned and new families came. Creating a space of welcome and hospitality for these younger families was initially a bit bumpy as we undertook a "make over" of the narthex and fellowship hall to make it more welcoming. However, within a few weeks those who had resisted the changes were now on board with them as they began to see young families return to our church. Any reservations about changes were silenced by the joy of welcoming young people back into our church.

When we first hired our new youth director, the youth met during worship time in our youth room. Within a year, they outgrew that room and began meeting in the chapel. During that same time frame, the director realized a need for the youth to experience worship. So, they began attending worship on the first Sunday of the month so they could experience worship, and in doing so, they found opportunities to serve and participate in worship. Now our children meet in worship for the beginning portion, then go up front to a children's sermon, after which they leave the "big church" to go to "children's church." This leaves the children and youth somewhat segregated from the larger congregation.

Although we have achieved the goal of bringing young families back to the church, this cohort of young families with children and youth are becoming uniquely bonded to one another instead of being bonded to the larger congregation. If the youth director needs to cancel youth group/the youth meeting, many of the young families will not come to church either. In response to this problem, my Doctor of Ministry project will work on integrating these younger families in new ways into the life of our church, deepening our sense of connections across the generations.



While these families have a sense of belonging to each other, I want to increase their sense of belonging to the life of our broader congregation. It is my argument that belonging is essential to our identity and our identity is an essential piece of our faith formation. I also want to create space of welcome and hospitality for all generations, hoping that by experiencing multiple generations in worship, we will no longer be alienated from one another. I hope this project helps us cross generational boundaries to build relationships which will help shape and form our faith and that we become a vibrant community of faithful followers valuing the witness of each generation. We might build up the Body of Christ by strengthening the unity of the church and honoring the worth of every person at the table no matter their “age, race, or nation”<sup>5</sup> and truly reflect heaven on earth as Christ’s body being one with each other and one in ministry with all the world. Worshipping in an intergenerational setting allows for each person to feel like a vital part of the family of God. Intergenerational worship shapes everyone’s faith, has biblical support, and helps connect us to our theological heritage.

In Holly Catterton Allen and Christine Lawton Ross’s book, *Intergenerational Christian Formation*, they quote a leading expert of intergenerational ministries, James Frazier. Frazier writes, “The best way to be formed in Christ is to sit among the elders, listen to their stories, break bread with them, and drink from the same cup, observing how these earlier generations of saints ran the race, fought the fight, and survived in grace.”<sup>6</sup> Yet, in many American churches a silo effect is happening. Generations are being divided up and put into same generation classes. Children and youth are shuttled out of worship and older generations are worshipping, often times, in the same way their parents worshipped. As Frazier notes, “This lack of significant

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<sup>5</sup> *Book of Worship*, 100.

<sup>6</sup> Holly Catterton Allen and Christine Lawton Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation: Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community and Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic of InterVarsity Press, 2012), 17.

communication and relations between generations must be addressed if churches are to thrive—not merely survive—now and in the future.”<sup>7</sup> Communicating and building relationships across generational lines will strengthen not only our churches, but our people as followers of Christ.

To understand the importance of intergenerational worship, it will be helpful to define the term *intergenerational*. James White defines the term as “two or more different age groups of people in a religious community learning/growing/living in faith through in-common experiences, parallel thinking, contributive-occasions, and interactive sharing.”<sup>8</sup>

Intergenerational ministry is ministry which engages people of all ages for a common experience or expression of faith. Further, according to Holly Catteron Allen, “Intergenerational ministry occurs when a congregation intentionally combines the generations together in mutual serving, sharing, or learning with the core activities of the church in order to live out being the body of Christ to each other and the greater community.”<sup>9</sup> By bringing together the generations in worship for this project, it is my hope that people will become more comfortable interacting with those outside their age range and that people will begin to develop relationships across generational lines, which will help shape and deepen one another’s faith. This paper will show how generations worshipping together will create a spiritually healthy church and help to shape the faith in young people. It will show biblical and theological support as well as best practices from faith formation experts.

## **GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES**

Our North American culture is moving at warp speed with new technologies, social media, and streaming sources flooding individuals with more information than they can possibly

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<sup>7</sup> Allen and Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation*, 19.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 20.

<sup>9</sup> Holly Catteron Allen, *Intergenerate*, (Abillene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2018), 17.

absorb. Additionally, churches have more competition on Sunday morning than ever before. Alongside these changes are the generations of people who live their lives, often times, in relation to the culture of their formative years with each seeing things through their unique generational world view. For example, a baby boomer will see the world very differently than a generation x person. A baby boomer will want to preserve an institution whereas a generation x person will want to form a movement. Most multigenerational congregations consist of six generations. These six are the “greatest generation,” the silent generation, baby boomers, generation x, millennials, and generation z. Each generation has been shaped by its culture and then in turn shapes the culture for future generations. Each generation brings a unique set of gifts and perspectives to the church. Each generation also engages with the church in ways different from the others. Knowing this helps leaders to shape mission and ministry to each generation in such a way that those gifts and perspectives might be used to build up the church and her members. This section will explore the characteristics of each generation and how those characteristics may impact the church.

Age and generation are two different things. This means that a thirty-year-old today does not necessarily relate to, see, or experience the church or world the way a thirty-year-old will in twenty years. For example, a thirty-year-old today will likely not have a memory of using a cell phone in middle school but will remember life pre-9/11 when Americans did not live in fear of terrorism or have routine active shooter drills in school. In twenty years the opposite will be true. A thirty-year-old will remember using a cell phone in middle school and will not remember a time when Americans did not live in fear of terrorism or have routine active shooter drills in school. Looking at cultural influences rather than age gives a clearer understanding as to how someone may respond to the world.

Tom Brokaw coined the term the “Greatest Generation” which describes those persons born between 1901-1924. This generation was shaped by World War II and included people who sacrificed self for country. When they came back from the war, they did not speak about their sacrifices. They returned to home and work and carried on upholding their duty to God, family, and country. Members of the greatest generation usually felt that joining a church was the “right thing to do.”<sup>10</sup> The members of this generation are known to be loyal as they were united in their sole purpose of defeating the evil in the world and giving peace space to reign. Their identity is found in their community. They are defined by their faith, family, and nation.

The “silent generation” are those born between 1925-1942. What is most interesting about this generation is that not a single US president emerged from them.<sup>11</sup> They were not visionaries, rather they were those who lived and survived the Great Depression. According to Holly Catteron Allen, “A church dominated by this generation will typically mirror the civics’ (greatest generation) preferences for traditional worship. However, silents are more likely to be flexible about worship style if they understand how a new style will help the younger generations.”<sup>12</sup> Many churches which are thriving today are those churches whose “silents” were flexible enough to make small changes along the way so that enormous changes would not have to be made later on. For example, members of this generation are more likely to be willing to change the style of worship, music, or even time of service if they understand how it is helpful to younger generations. I found this to be true in Jupiter.

The baby boomer generation are those persons born between 1943-1960. This generation saw the election of a young president (John F. Kennedy) and the ushering in of the civil rights

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<sup>10</sup> Allen, *Intergenerate*, 77.

<sup>11</sup> George HW Bush and Jimmy Carter were both born in 1924. This means they may likely have some tendencies of the silent generation.

<sup>12</sup> Allen and Ross. *Intergenerational Christian Formation*, 151.

amendment. They worked hard to put money into retirement so they could enjoy life in their later years. For them, “A sense of community, now secondary to organic relationships, was achieved when united with others who shared the desire for the same experience.”<sup>13</sup> This means they did not have the same sense of loyalty to their local church nor did they feel the obligation to attend church on a regular basis. Today, their identity and sense of belonging does not lie solely in faith, family, and community. Identity is extended into their personal relationships. Boomers no longer have a need to go to church regularly and they have a desire to shop for their church. “A majority boomer church will most likely have a contemporary worship format. Boomers are the initiator of ‘worship wars’ as they like praise music, guitars and drums, and they tend to believe that contemporary music will keep the younger generations in church.”<sup>14</sup> With the decrease in loyalty to the local church, churches began to decline unless they were clergy or staff driven. The areas of ministry sustained in Jupiter during boomer decline were those led by clergy or staff.

Generation X includes those born from 1961 to 1981. Being raised primarily by Boomers, this generation learned to work effectively and efficiently. “They introduced the concepts of job sharing, working at home, and business casual.”<sup>15</sup> After the fall-out of Watergate and Vietnam, this generation no longer had blind trust in the government and would question policies foreign and domestic. When it comes to congregational worship, “A gen x-led church would tend to blend modern technology with artistic design and ancient worship practices to provide a multisensory and participatory experience.”<sup>16</sup> Gen X-ers like to serve and will join a mission service if they are convinced of a real need. Their sense of community is shaped by the sense that community can no longer be counted on. They experienced the highest divorce rates in

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<sup>13</sup> Allen, *Intergenerate*, 79.

<sup>14</sup> Allen and Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation*, 152.

<sup>15</sup> Allen, *Intergenerate*, 79.

<sup>16</sup> Allen and Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation*, 152.

the history of our nation. They often were latch-key kids going to empty home after school. The value of church is found in what it offers to them and their children. Membership in church is not a given and they are more reluctant to join than previous generations. This is the group coming back to our church now that we are offering ministries of value to their families.

The next generation are the millennials who were born between 1982-2004. They came of age in the new millennium as well as the new century. Millennials are marked as being community gatherers who like to bring people together over a cause. As Allen and Ross explain, “The Millennials’ positive relationship with their elders and openness to diversity enables majority Millennial churches to embrace a wide variety of worship practices and styles in such way that all ages and cultures might worship and build community together.”<sup>17</sup> However, the brick and mortar local church holds less appeal than the local coffee shop or community gathering space. Millennials tend to have little to no trust in institutions and often define their faith as “religious not spiritual.” Millennials who are in the church are far more interested in mission than institutional structure. They care about the environment and their world. Several of our former youth, now millennials, have joined churches where they live based on the missional ministries of the church.

Finally, generation z are those born between 2005-2025. This generation is still being born. These folks have no idea of a world prior to modern technology and technology is for them, a native language. In addition, “They are remarkably multiethnic and biracial. Between 2000 and 2010, the country’s Hispanic population grew at four times the rate of the total population. The number of Americans self-identifying as biracial rose 134 percent.”<sup>18</sup> This generation will more likely go to an academic or sports camp than to a church camp. They will

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<sup>17</sup> Allen and Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation*, 153.

<sup>18</sup> Allen, *Intergenerate*, 81.

not know a form of communication that does not include texting. As Allen explained, “Community for this generation brings a sense of belonging and meaning in a networked, yet fragmented, world. The desire for authentic relationships overlaps with a sense that time must be used wisely.”<sup>19</sup> They long to have meaningful relationships but want those formed around a purpose. They would do better forming relationships on a “missions trip or serving on a nonprofit board.”<sup>20</sup> They desire community which will give them a space to learn, grow, and to gain experience and wisdom. They will go where they need to in order to find it, but will not be loyal to the place. Rather, they will be loyal to the experience. Our church’s generation z youth are much more likely to enjoy the experience of worship on a missions trip than they are an experience of worship on a Sunday morning at our church.

Understanding each generation and the unique circumstances which have helped shape them gives us insight into the way churches might want to consider shaping mission and ministry. Each generation has a unique perspective of the church and world and will engage with the church according to their understanding of church and their need for community, belonging, and connection. While recognizing the value and uniqueness of each generation and how they function within the church, we must also look to Scripture to find support for intergenerational ministry.

### **BIBLICAL THEMES**

Expressions of intergenerational community in the bible support the case that churches should consider intergenerational community as part of the communal story. The word “generation” is used throughout both the Old and New Testaments. According to Howard

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<sup>19</sup> Allen, *Intergenerate*, 82.

<sup>20</sup> Allen, *Intergenerate*, 82.

Vanderwell, “the phrase ‘in/throughout/among the generations’ appears more than 90 times.”<sup>21</sup> This suggests that God addresses communities not only of elders and adults, but of all ages. We also know from reading primarily in the Old Testament that children were often present in a significant way and played an important role in the story. While it is somewhat challenging to find concrete scriptural evidence of children in worship, there is enough evidence to suggest that children were present and important not only to Moses and the prophets, but also to God and the gathered community. We read in several places about the inclusion of children and youth (Deuteronomy 6: 6-9, Psalm 78:1-8). While we do not have evidence of children in the Temple in the Old Testament we do have evidence of their participation in religious ceremonies.

God called forth a community of people, the Israelites, to belong to God’s own self. As early as Genesis, intergenerational community was patterned by the Hebrew people. Families worshipped God together and “Jewish children were trained at an early age in the worship of God.”<sup>22</sup> The children were given prominent roles in some of the most holy occasions. According to Gregory Young, “During Feast of the Tabernacle they would wave and shake branches of palm, and boughs of myrtle and willow bound together.”<sup>23</sup> Children were given a prominent role in the Feast of the Passover as, “it was the questions of the children which enabled the re-telling of the story.”<sup>24</sup> Additionally, children and youth were part of the renewal of covenant between Israel and God found in Deuteronomy.

In Deuteronomy, while Moses was leading Israel through the wilderness, he called the people to renew their covenant with God in a time of worship, and Moses described the intergenerational nature of the congregations— ‘the leaders

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<sup>21</sup> Howard Vanderwell, *The Church of All Ages, Congregations Worshiping Together* ( Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2008), 24.

<sup>22</sup> Gregory Barton Young, *Developing and Implementing Intergenerational Liturgies for the Seasons of Advent and Christmas at Pennsauken United Methodist Church*, (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1990), 14.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 14.



of your tribes, your elders, and your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your women, and the aliens who are in your camp.’<sup>25</sup>

This suggests that God’s covenant was not made with a single or selected generations, but, rather, God’s covenant was made with the whole community—children and youth included. It set a precedent for future covenants to be made by God and Israel to be inclusive of children and youth.

We also read in scripture that Moses’ tradition of including children in the life of the assembly continued with Joshua, who followed Moses’ as leader of the Hebrew people.

When Israel had crossed the Jordan under the leadership of Joshua, Moses’ successor, the people carried out the conquest of Jericho but then experienced a humiliating defeat in a battle in punishment for one warrior’s sin. So once again they were called together for a renewal of the covenant, and Joshua led them. ‘There was not a word of all that Moses commanded that Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel, and the women, and the little ones, and the aliens who resided among them.’<sup>26</sup>

The Hebrew people did not only have the children included in the covenant and community, but children were also an active part of the community fully participating in the hearing and reciting of the faith. This is clear in the words of Deuteronomy 6:6-9,

“Keep these word that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates .”<sup>27</sup>

The children were expected to live, walk, and talk their faith traditions. Having children engage in reciting the words of their faith deepens their sense of belonging to the community and connects them to their identity as children of God. Teaching children to express their faith out

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<sup>25</sup> Vanderwell, *The Church of All Ages*, 22.

<sup>26</sup> Vanderwell, *The Church of All Ages*, 22.

<sup>27</sup> NRSV, Deuteronomy 6: 6-9.

loud teaches a child that adults want to hear what they have to say. It also teaches them that belonging to a group means “all voices have value.”<sup>28</sup> Having children talk about their faith with adults shows children their voice matters.

In other places in the Old Testament we see both God and the Hebrew people including children and whole families in some worship events. In Leviticus 23, we find children camping with their parents during the Feast of the Tent. Vanderwell writes, “After King Solomon built the Temple for Israel in Jerusalem, we find similar worship events involving all generations. Jehoshaphat led them in renewal, and ‘all Judah stood before the Lord, with their little ones, their wives, and their children (2 Chronicles 20:13).’”<sup>29</sup> In Nehemiah, the priest Ezra calls “both men and women and all who could hear with understanding” to be brought into the assembly to listen to the reading of the book of law.<sup>30</sup> Clearly, there is scriptural evidence of children being present and part of the assembly as we read in the prophet Joel when the prophet calls people of all ages to receive the blessing of God. “Then afterward I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your old men will shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions.”<sup>31</sup> If God is to give prophesy to sons and daughters then surely God is calling those same sons and daughters to a valued place in the gathered community. God is calling them to a place where their voices matter and should be heard by the whole assembly. Otherwise, the larger congregation may miss deep and meaningful revelation from God. God is an inclusive God and our church should reflect this inclusivity.

More importantly, God’s own son, Jesus, was very clear on the role of children in community. Jesus became upset and indignant when his disciples were preventing people from

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<sup>28</sup> Peter Block, *Community The Structure of Belonging* (Oakland, CA: Berrett- Koehler Publishers, Inc. 2008), 96.

<sup>29</sup> Vanderwell. *The Church of All Ages*, 22.

<sup>30</sup> NRSV, Nehemiah, 8:2.

<sup>31</sup> NRSV, Joel, 2: 28.

bringing the children to him, saying, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.”<sup>32</sup> Jesus then told his followers that all should come to him as children. Jesus blessed the children and laid his hands on them. Jesus modeled for us what it looks like for a community to honor children in its midst. Children are to be welcomed and blessed, not hidden and silenced. This scene also may suggest that children learn by practice. Let them come forward to receive Christ. Let them partake in communion and experience the grace of God. Jesus drew children unto himself and was adamant that no one should stop them. We, likewise, should not stop children in worship today from receiving this grace of Christ.

We see a variety of other New Testament examples to uphold my point about the inclusion of children in worship. First, Jesus was presented in the Temple himself as a child to participate in the religious rite of circumcision (Luke 2:21). Second, the very birth of the church includes children. Acts tells us the Holy Spirit was poured out to the whole assembly, not just certain generations. Third, Peter says in his sermon in Acts, “For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.”<sup>33</sup> Finally, we see in Baptism, the initiation into the church also included infants and children as we read that whole households of faith are baptized. According to Young,

Peter’s said, ‘Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, everyone who the Lord our God calls to him.’ The understanding here is that the Gospel, the promise of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, is a gift from God given to those whom God chooses including the children of those who have received the Gospel and have been baptized.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> NRSV, Mark 10: 14.

<sup>33</sup> Acts 2: 39.

<sup>34</sup> Young, *Developing and Implementing Intergenerational Liturgies for the Seasons of Advent and Christmas at Pennsauken United Methodist Church*, 15.

Both the Old Testament and New Testament give us a biblical witness with examples of God's grace extending to all people, even children. The Old Testament shows us multiple times that the gathering of the assembly for worship included people of all ages. The New Testament shows us how Jesus and the early followers understood the role and place of children within the gathered assembly of community. We see Jesus welcoming children and those children being incorporated into the life of the community through the practices of celebrating feasts, practicing baptism and circumcision. Even the disciples moved from excluding children to including children. As both the Old Testament and the New Testament give a biblical witness of including children and youth in the gathered assembly, then it is logical that we are to do the same today.

### THEOLOGICAL CONNECTIONS

As a Methodist theologian, I look to the Wesleyan theological understanding of grace and nature of God to interpret how God is at work in the world, the church, and every individual. Grace is central to John Wesley's theology "because grace as Wesley defines it is most fundamentally God's love for humanity made evident in Christ."<sup>35</sup> The grace of God and God's love for humanity are deeply intertwined in Wesleyan theology. God loves us first and we respond by loving God back. Because of God's great love for us, God's grace is at work in the world. As the Methodist Book of Discipline proclaims, "Grace pervades our understanding of Christian faith and life. By grace we mean the undeserved, unmerited, and loving action of God in human existence through the ever-present Holy Spirit."<sup>36</sup> I draw upon the understanding of God's grace being made real in worship as a reason to support intergenerational ministries and in this case, specifically, intergenerational worship. When we include children and youth in

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<sup>35</sup> Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 1998), 26.

<sup>36</sup> *Book of Discipline*, p. 49.

worship, they have the opportunity to experience the grace of God through the power of the Holy Spirit and to be formed in the faith we claim.

Every religion has some way to understand the relationship between the mysterious vastness of God and the finiteness of humanity. For Wesleyans, this intersection is God's love and grace rooted in our identity as children of God. We belong to God and one another, and as members of Christ's body we are in service to all the world. We believe God's grace is manifest in both personal and communal ways. As our United Methodist Book of Discipline states, "Life in the Spirit" involves diligent use of the means of grace such as praying, fasting, attending upon the sacraments, and inward searching of solitude. It also encompasses the communal life of the church in worship, mission, evangelism, service, and social witness."<sup>37</sup> Because we believe that God's grace is manifest in both personal and communal experiences, it is vital for children and youth to participate in both. By participating in intergenerational worship, children and youth have the opportunity to experience the means of grace which shape us in our faith and help us to reflect the character of Christ.

First and foremost, I believe God's Spirit is in constant pursuit to make God's name and nature known to humanity so that we might know of the unconditional love of God. I agree with the Book of Discipline's claim, "We assert that God's grace is manifest in all creation."<sup>38</sup> Therefore, God is at work in every human being. "While the grace of God is undivided, it precedes salvation as 'prevenient grace,' continues in 'justifying grace,' and is brought to fruition in 'sanctifying grace.'" While there is one grace, how we receive it depends on our relationship with God. The prevenient grace of God is the grace which goes before we know our need for God and continually tries to wake us up to our need of God in our lives. Having children

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<sup>37</sup> *Book of Discipline*, 47.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 50.

and youth in worship provides them an opportunity to experience God before they even know God. Through communion, for example, children can experience the prevenient grace of God. They may not have words to express God, but they may experience the mystery of God while sharing in the meal with other congregants. If God uses whatever is at God's disposal to help us see, feel, know, and trust God's presence in our lives, then it is essential for children to see, feel, and experience adults experiencing God in worship.

The justifying grace of God is the grace we receive when we choose for ourselves our faith. It is the time when we claim our faith in Jesus Christ and receive God's saving grace. Justifying grace restores us to right relationship with God. Sanctifying grace is God's grace at work in us every moment of every day renewing, sustaining, healing, and restoring us so that we might have strength and grow in our relationship with God and in likeness of Christ. It is the grace of God which helps us to love God and neighbor, and it is God's grace which God gives to make us holy in heart and life. This grace helps us to live as followers of Christ. The sanctifying grace of God comes in many ways but it comes especially through acts experienced in worship like prayer, the sacraments, scripture reading, and hearing the word proclaimed. Grace also comes in community, and for children to experience the grace of God in community they simply must be present within the community.

The United Methodist Church recognizes two sacraments: baptism and holy communion. Within the United Methodist Church, we believe "We are initiated and incorporated into this community of faith by Baptism, receiving the promise of the Holy Spirit that re-creates and transforms us. Through the regular celebration of Holy Communion, we participate in the risen presence of Jesus Christ and are thereby nurtured for faithful discipleship."<sup>39</sup> Having children

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<sup>39</sup> *Book of Discipline*, 48.

and youth participate in the sacraments of the church allows them not only to experience the mystery of God, but also to be recognized as persons of value in the church. Separating them out during the holy moments of the sacrament may send a message to them that they are not necessary to the church, thereby diminishing the role that Jesus himself assigned to them.

The grace of God is a constant presence at work in the world revealing God's self to humanity so that we might know who God is, who we are to God, and what the nature of our relationship is to be with God. Grace helps us answer some of life's bigger questions like, "What is our purpose?" In Scripture, we see that people have long struggled to understand the intersection of God and humanity. How does God work in the world? How do we know? What does this mean for us and how do we teach this to our children? How do we teach them God's love is real?

God's love for us is made real through God's grace. God takes the initiative to draw us back to God leaving enough of an imprint in nature and in our spirit to help us recognize our connection and need of something greater than ourselves. God uses prevenient grace to speak to this imprint within us. Jesus is the divine revelation of the Triune God. Jesus shows us through his life, death, and resurrection the name and nature of God and reveals to us who God is and who we are to God. This revelation reflects the nature of God's love. Helping children understand and interpret the revelation of God is central to their developing faith. The revelation of God may happen in those moments of grace we experience as children, youth, or adults. Understanding revelation and how God is made known to us is critical for us to understand God's grace.

This leads to the question: What is revelation, how does it work and how do we teach it to children youth? According to Tyrone Inbody, "revelation" is the English translation of the

Greek word apokalypsis. The word signifies and “uncovering” or “unveiling” of what was concealed or unknown. In Scripture God is revealed in nature (Ps. 19:1-4; 29:3-11) as well as in direct visions (Exod. 33:17-23; Num. 24:2-9; Isa.6), auditions (1Sam. 3:2-14; Isa. 22:14), dreams (Gen. 28:10-17; 1 Sam. 28:6), and theophanies (Exod.3).”<sup>40</sup> While Scripture is a way God is revealed to us, I also believe God is revealed through other “means of grace”. God can be revealed to us in the sacraments, prayer, fellowship, study, and worship.

Because children often learn through imitation, it stands to reason that children will learn who God is by experiencing God alongside adults in worship. When children learning the reason we love is because God first loves us, this lays the foundation for children to have their faith centered in God’s love for them. When children understand that a relationship with God will reveal to them their identity as beloved children of God, it may also help them develop a deep sense of purpose. Children learn they were created by God and for God—for the purpose of love. They learn from the community the core of their faith. When children are in worship reciting the creeds, praying the Lord’s prayer, singing the songs of our faith, reading the liturgies, and participating in the sacraments of the church, they are learning the Wesleyan theology which teaches them they are loved by God.

Faith is often the first step to knowing the unknown God. I believe faith helps us to see that which is hidden and mysterious. While the world says, “I will believe it when I see it”, the Kingdom of God says, “Believe it and you will see it.” This is where the importance of intergenerational ministries comes into consideration. By witnessing others live their faith, especially in worship, children become more connected to the adults of the church so that they interact outside of worship and can more fully learn from those who are living their faith beyond

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<sup>40</sup> Inbody, Tyrone, *The Faith of the Christian Church: An Introduction to Theology* (William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI; 2005), 57.



Sunday services. When children hear and learn stories of people's lives changing because of their faith it will teach them how faith changes lives. This is how we know our faith is real and this is how we learn what faith in God can do. The power of God is real because God's love changes us and those changes we experience are real and lasting. Additionally, the changes are real because they often lead us in a desire to help change the world around us. Therefore, while experiences of God's grace will draw children and youth closer to God, it is also beneficial for them to have adults helping to interpret experiences to them. God can also be revealed to us through church tradition. When children learn alongside adults what the church has taught and practiced for centuries, this will surely help shape their faith. If the church can embed young people's stories within the larger story of the people of God, we will give them a rich context within which they may practice their faith. They will learn of the consistency of God's presence in the world.

While the world moves at warp speed and chaos seems to swirl around us at all times, if children and youth experience worship with adults they will come to know the steadfast presence of God no matter the speed of our universe. By participating in the order of worship, singing the theology of our faith, hearing the reading of the word, serving in active roles, children and youth will learn there is a rhythm to the life of the church. They will hear stories of how God is the creator and sustainer of life and can bring calm out of the chaos of our lives. They will come to understand the arc of scripture. Not only will they learn that God created covenants in the Old Testament which allowed for people of all ages to be included, but they will also hear during communion of the new covenant created by Christ. They will be active participants receiving God's grace and hearing it interpreted, and they will be transformed in the process.

Wesley suggests the church exists for humanity and for God. Ted Runyon asserts, "The

holiness of the church consists purely and simply in the fact that her true members participate to one degree or another in the holiness of their Lord and are transformed by it.”<sup>41</sup> If children and youth are not considered true members of the church participating in her life, then what are they considered to be? When children and youth participate in worship, they have the opportunity to experience God’s love and grace each week. As they participate in communion, and hear the scripture read and proclaimed, they will experience the means of grace in their lives. These experiences will become a bedrock of memories upon which they might build their faith. Experiencing people of all ages worshipping together, they will learn that God loves and values every person of every age. Hopefully, this will lay the foundation that no matter what the culture might say about them, they are loved by God as they are, wherever they are. Intergenerational worship may also begin to allow the generation z youth the ability to connect the missional purpose of the church to their experience of worship and, in turn, increase their commitment to the church.

### **FAITH FORMATION**

Faith begins when we become aware of God’s great love for us and continues with finding our identity as a child of God. Our faith is shaped and formed not only by the work of God’s grace and Holy Spirit, but also through the work of community. “The Christian community has a significant role to play in the development of that faith for all its members, so understanding the way faith develops is important to ministry.”<sup>42</sup> N.T. Wright shared a story of being asked by a relative who had a new baby how old a child is before he or she becomes aware of God. His response, “About five minutes.”<sup>43</sup> This suggests that from nearly the moment an

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<sup>41</sup> Runyon, *The New Creation*, 103-104.

<sup>42</sup> Vanderwell, *The Church of All Ages*, 35.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 38.

infant is born, they become aware of a God greater than themselves. N.T. Wright argues that if a child can become aware of the mother at such a young age, it is possible for the same child to become aware of God. This section will help the readers to understand faith development. In deepening our understanding of how faith is developed in children and youth, we will be more equipped to create worship environments which will foster this development.

James Fowler, an expert on faith development, says that faith development is not unlike language development. While religions may vary, the development of faith within those religions is similar in nature. While he does suggest that “unlike cognitive development, which seems to reach its apex by early adulthood, faith development continues well into late adulthood.”<sup>44</sup> There are common similarities in how each person develops in their faith, yet, there are individual characteristics for each person as well. One person’s faith is more likely to be shaped by experience, while another person’s faith is shaped more by tradition. Some may have the gift of faith making faith formation easier while others may struggle to have faith at all.

Fowler claims that the first stage of faith found in preschool children “primarily reflects their parents’ faith.”<sup>45</sup> We know that young children learn by watching and hearing, and then they imitate and mimic what they see others do and say. Children typically learn identity and belonging from those trusted family members who teach this to them. They learn who they are and to whom they belong from their families. In the same way, children will learn religious identity and belonging which will help form their faith by being a part of a faith community. While children will know they belong to the church mainly by watching their parents belong, congregations can help shape the faith of a child by teaching that child that he or she belongs to the church community. Children learn who God is by listening to stories and sharing in the

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<sup>44</sup> Vanderwell, *The Church of All Ages*, 35.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 38.

experiences of the gathered community. It was during this stage that I remember my own Sunday School teacher telling me Jesus loves me. Hearing that from a loving, trusted adult had stuck with me my whole life long. She played a vital role in forming my faith at a young age.

Stage 2 of faith development begins around age 6 and continues through ages 11-12. “These children are seeing stories as disconnected individual stories that come from a book that they know is special.”<sup>46</sup> As these children get older they are less likely to leave the worship service so the goal is to try and connect the children to these stories and help them find their story inside God’s story. As they grow, learn, and develop they begin to understand belonging beyond their families. In the United Methodist Church, they start to hear of confirmation and some even attend a confirmation class. At this stage, they begin to decide if they wish to claim the faith for themselves. Worship should engage them in the story. They may begin to participate through singing or playing an instrument they are learning to play. They begin to get drawn into the practice of worship, solidifying their understanding of who they are and to whom they belong.

Finally stage 3 is the time when a youth enters middle school and high school. “The ability to think abstractly allows them to put the stories of faith that they have heard over the years into a larger story—a story of stories. They also begin to see the world from others’ perspectives.”<sup>47</sup> While this age group is consumed with themselves more than ever, they are also able to begin to see and understand the world around them, including other persons’ struggles and joys. They begin to want to claim their faith for their own lives and to choose what to believe and how to live their beliefs out in their own lives. While they are making their choice of faith, they really have not yet learned of the many choices out there from which to choose. It is at this

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<sup>46</sup> Vanderwall, *The Church of All Ages*, 41.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 42.

stage that really teaching and solidifying the tenets of the faith are critical for the youth. This may occur when they live their faith through practice of worship and in mission and service to the world outside of the church.

Overall, children and youth who feel valued and loved by a community of people will be enveloped in grace in such a way that their faith will have room to develop and grow. While there is much we still need to learn through research about how faith is formed in young people, what we do know is, “for high school and college students, there is a relationship between attendance at church-wide worship services and sticky faith.”<sup>48</sup> Hence, including children and youth in worship is known to be critical to being formed in a faith which will last.

### **INTERGENERATION ADVENT SERIES (THE PROJECT)**

The project I decided to undertake was an intergenerational Advent worship series. This project eventually included five worship services in December with all ages participating in all aspects of worship. However, it took a failed attempt at an intergenerational experience for me to arrive at this decision. The first attempt at intergenerational ministry was a weekend experience called On Mission Together. The purpose of this weekend was to divide up into intergenerational groups based on missional ministry preferences and to go out into the community and serve. We put up a list of sign-up sheets for all ages and abilities. We offered several opportunities to serve including a beach clean-up project, planting flowers at an Assisted Living facility, making cards for shut ins, and a technology seminar taught by our youth.

By far, our largest group was the beach clean-up group. The next largest was our group which went to an assisted living facility. The third largest group was our card making group. No

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<sup>48</sup> Dr. Kara E. Powell and Dr. Chap Clark, *Sticky Faith: Everyday ideas to build lasting faith in your kids* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 2011), 97.

one signed up for the reverse mentoring. Several youth signed up to teach but no adults signed up to participate. While groups were in nature intergenerational, we discovered that during the service projects the generations stayed to themselves with the exception of family units. While it was a worthwhile weekend, our On Mission Together project did not accomplish what I had hoped for in terms of creating intergenerational relationships.

I conferred with my colleague and friend Melissa Cooper, Associate Coach for Vibrant Faith and contributor to the book *InterGenerate*. Melissa told me, “If you want your church to truly be intergenerational then you have to worship together. Children and youth have to be in the worship service.” She pointed me to several books which confirmed this theory, some of which are represented in this paper. After much prayer and discernment, I decided to try an Intergenerational Advent Series. This was a four week series which incorporated children and youth into the practice of worship (See Appendixes A and B).

We gave children coloring and work sheets while the youth had interactive bulletins which were intended to keep them engaged in worship (See Appendixes C and D). I used The Message version of Scripture to keep the language relevant to the younger people so they could connect to the readings. The sermons contained illustrations which were understandable to children and youth and hopefully engaging for older adults as well. The children and youth were integrated into the music program in the third week when we had our Christmas in Song service. Some children sang solos, as did some of our youth. Each week, we would have a youth playing the prelude or working the sound system. They served as greeters, ushers, liturgists, and communion servers. Some helped run the sound and IT system. The children and youth participated in every aspect of service.

However, some of the most powerful moments occurred during the lighting of the Advent Candle. Each week, rather than having one family merely lead the congregation in written liturgy, there was a faith witness time from four people, each representing a different generation. The first week the Advent liturgy focused on hope (See Appendix E). We asked a child, youth, parent age, and grand-parent aged person respond to one of the following questions. Where have you experienced hope? Where would you like to see hope? The next week we did the same with peace. The following weeks the themes were joy, then love, and finally on Christmas Eve, Christ. The faith witnesses coming from children and youth was astounding. One child wrote a beautiful poem about hope. She wrote about seeing hope in flowers and butterflies and she connected this to her faith. One youth shared how she and a few other youth had a profound experience in worship while attending church camp earlier in the summer. She said that after this experience the group was standing around a campfire trying to explain this deep emotion they were feeling. They could not find a name for what they were experiencing. She said in preparing to share where she has experienced joy for our advent worship service, she realized that what the youth had experienced was a profound sense of joy. An older couple shared how the church provided comfort for them after their son died. Hearing people of all ages share their faith was a rich and meaningful experience for our congregation. The children demonstrated purity and depth of faith, and the older generations offered maturity and wisdom. Each person/generation added a richness to our worship experience.

## **SURVEY AND FOCUS GROUP RESULTS**

The evaluation of this project comes from two surveys (See Appendixes F and G), a focus group of youth and children, and individual conversations with people from all generations. The surveys were taken at the beginning and the end of the project. They were divided into questions regarding membership, generational age groups, levels of connection to the church, comfortability of interaction with ages other than their own, and frequency of interaction. I hoped to see increased movements from levels of comfortability and frequency of interactions between the generations.

The results from the survey did not quite show the movement I had hoped for, although the written comments on the second survey showed overwhelming support for the intergenerational worship experience. The second survey asked if the reader had filled out a previous survey. Those who answered no to this question, I set aside for the purpose of comparing before and after surveys. The results of the two surveys side by side showed little change in terms of how comfortable people felt or how often they interacted with those of a different generation.

The comments on the second survey were incredibly positive for the experience. One youth wrote, "I experienced everyone's stories and their love for Jesus and what I can do to show my love for God, and that God is there for me everywhere I go and has a plan for me." Someone from the 31-50 age bracket wrote, "I found it meaningful and very impactful. Seeing how God works in the different generations warmed my soul and reminded me how God stays faithful through the ages. Do it again!" Someone in the 51-65 age range wrote, "The intergenerational experience brought a new and deeper meaning to the Advent Season." The only "negative" comment was from someone who wrote, "Liked it didn't love it." Out of 179 surveys, to have only one semi-underwhelming response was a most positive experience.



Following the project, I met with a focus group of four children and six youth to discuss their experience during the intergenerational worship services and the connection they feel to the larger congregation. I also asked, “What can we do in worship to make your experience feel more connected?” Regarding connections, one girl said when she spoke up front and looked out at people she felt able to connect. When she made eye contact with members, she felt loved. Another said, “I understood the sermons and they helped me connect more.” Two of the children shared how nervous they were to speak up front in worship, but when they began speaking they became less nervous and were happy to do it. Several of them commented on the response from the congregation. They felt very affirmed as people spoke to them after the service and told them what a good job they did and/or how much their words had touched them. One youth said, “With my church family it is the only time I can say everything I’m thinking and everyone will understand.” Most shared that the process of discerning what to say in worship was hard, but once they figured that out, it was joy. When asked what we could do to make worship more meaningful, they responded they would like to have more singing. Several in the focus group sang with the adults during our Christmas in Song program. They all said they felt very supported.

In speaking with some of the parents, the feedback shows that faith was being shaped and formed in the process of participating in worship. One parent said her daughter could not think of anything that brings about joy except for her family. Her mom told her, “Go and think some more.” The daughter came back and said, “Mom, the church is also my family. Church brings me joy.” A youth shared this on joy: “One time at youth camp we were all standing together after having a powerful worship experience and we didn’t know what it was that we were feeling. In preparing to talk about joy today, I realize that what we were experiencing was joy.” As shown

in these focus group interviews, stretching children and youth to think theologically develops and deepens their faith, their understanding of the church, and their understanding of God. Having them share their faith in front of the congregation helps give them the confidence to talk about their faith.

### **SELF-REFLECTION AND CONCLUSION**

What the surveys, focus group, and individual conversations do not reveal is the DNA change happening in the congregation. The power of the Holy Spirit is moving in our midst and changing who we are and how we treat one another. Because of the response from the congregation, we have decided to make the first Sunday of every month an intergenerational worship service. I am overjoyed at the transformation taking place.

One Sunday in early 2020, I had a seven year old serving communion with me. There were two youth serving at a second station. Watching people from older generations coming forward to receive communion from a seven year old child while lovingly smiling at her was proof something was changing. Several years ago there would have been outrage at such a sight. Even the “matriarch” of the church who acted in the past as the liturgical police, has changed. She asked our youth director the name of the youth serving communion. She described the youth who looked as though she had not brushed her hair and was wearing a sweatshirt, yoga pants, and flip flops. Initially, our director’s heart sank fearing an oncoming verbal assault because of how the youth looked. Finally, our youth leader realized the matriarch of the church wanted to know who the girl was because of what was written on her sweatshirt—the name of the matriarch’s home state. The matriarch said, “She’s my people. I want to know her name so I can go and speak with her.” Ten years ago, this would have never happened. What joy to see the

older generations making room for the younger ones. This is one way our young people will grow in their faith and find their place serving in the church.

While I am not sure how I might have worded the surveys to achieve different results, what I did glean from this experience is that intergenerational worship is effective in connecting the generations. I do not believe worship alone is the answer to deepening the relationships across the ages. I hope to have more opportunities to emerge for cross generational relationship building. These are already emerging. Our newly formed men's group want to take some of the teenage boys and do service projects around the church so they might develop relationships and mentor them in the faith. We have a one-day missions trip scheduled in spring 2020 with youth and adults traveling to help provide hurricane clean up relief.

This experience has taught me the power of community and the value of every generation. Mentoring and reverse mentoring places value on each and every one of the community. When we have intergenerational relationships, we reflect the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. We bear witness to God's love for people of all ages. Intergenerational worship reflects both the Old Testament of gathered assembly and New Testament of Jesus' welcoming nature to all. I hope to continue to work to create sermons directed at people of all ages and people of all levels of faith. Being intentional in worship planning will also help to keep this momentum of inclusion going. As we now have experience of going beyond our age groups intergenerationally, I hope to press people to explore relationships outside of other demographics in their lives like race, human sexuality, economic status, geographic location, and political positions. It is my deepest hope that while we can worship together with joy, we might live alongside one another in peace as well. Oh, and one of our middle school youth has heard God calling her into ministry. Be still my heart.

## Appendix

- A. Sermon Series Image
- B. Worship Bulletin Sample
- C. Children Worship Sheet Sample
- D. Youth Interactive Worship Sheet Sample
- E. Candle Lighting Liturgy Sample
- F. First Survey
- G. Second Survey

## Appendix A

Sermon Series Image



## Appendix B

Worship Bulletin Sample

[12.01.19 Sunday Bulletin v4.pdf](#)

## Appendix C

Children's Worksheet Sample

[Children's Advent Worship Book.docx](#)

Appendix D

Youth Interactive Bulletin

[Youth Advent Week 1 Bulletin Insert PDF.pdf](#)



## Appendix E

## Advent Candle Lighting Liturgy

[12.01.19 Advent Liturgy HOPE monitor.pdf](#)

## Appendix F

First Survey

[12.01.19 First Survey Across the Ages monitor.pdf](#)

Appendix G

Final Survey

[Final Survey. 1-12-20.docx](#)

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